

MAY 2008 NEWSLETTER

Spring has sprung, and as one watches flowers open into bloom, and listens as the songs of birds fill the air, the mind turns to cleansing and detoxification (or love - some also think of that).

Cleansing (or detoxification), in naturopathic medicine language is performed for the purpose of improving the liver's ability to effectively eliminate toxins we are exposed to (including medications, alcohol, pesticides, etc.) in the course of daily living. It involves a temporary change in diet and lifestyle, and in some cases nutritional supplement use.

Cleanses are often included in treatment plans of patients with conditions ranging from digestive to menstrual concerns; from skin conditions to chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia, but can also be used by "well" people to optimize their health. After a cleanse, it is typical to experience increased energy, improved sleep and clearer complexion (among other benefits).

A cleanse should include five components: Efficient elimination, liver cell protection, decrease of toxin intake, stored toxin mobilization and liver function support. Efficient elimination simply refers to regular bowel habits and urination. Some use cleansing as a means of addressing chronic constipation, but this is "putting the horse before the cart" so to speak. Toxins removed from the blood are eliminated from the body via the stool (and urine), and as such, regular bowel movements are an essential prerequisite.

During a cleanse the cells of the liver may be exposed to higher than usual toxins levels. Milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*), contains a chemical called silymarin that stabilizes cell membranes of liver cells, protecting them from toxins.

Toxin intake may be reduced by fasting, but the liver is a very metabolically active organ and "starving" it is not the ideal means to this end at a time when you are attempting to increase its' activity. Eating an organic, whole-foods, high-fiber diet and avoiding caffeine, alcohol and "common allergens" (e.g., peanuts) effectively reduces toxins while nourishing the liver.

Stored toxin mobilization is achieved through activities like aerobic exercise. Many toxins are stored in body fat. As fat cells are broken apart for use as fuel during exercise, stored toxins are released into the blood. The liver can now filter these toxins out of the blood and they can be removed from the body.

Support of liver function is achieved through proper nutrition. The liver uses many nutrients to carry out its' functions, including protein, B vitamins and bitter tasting foods. People with metabolic illness (e.g., diabetes) or using prescription medications should also consult a naturopathic doctor before cleansing. Pregnant and lactating women should not cleanse.

Enjoy the weather. Speak to you next month.

HEALTH TIP

Cleanses, although daunting at first, succeed not as a result of raw will-power and discipline, but thorough planning and time management.

Many cleansing kits available at health stores address only one or two parameters of cleansing (usually efficient elimination and liver cell protection), and while not harmful are not comprehensive. Often the diet recommended is more restrictive than necessary, making successful completion difficult.

I may recommend that if planning a cleanse for the first time, speak to us for guidance and help in planning. Use the information and experience in the future and cleanse once yearly in the spring.

IN THE NEWS...

Critics of cleansing claim that the function of the liver is to detoxify, therefore cleansing is redundant, but studies show that exposure to pollutants decreases the livers' ability to detoxify (Environmental Toxicology 16 Mar 2004;19(2):103-8).

Other studies and case reports (using various nutritional supplements) show that after three weeks of detoxification subjects' experienced improved mental function (Archives of Environmental Health 1989;44:345-50), and a patient with long-term chronic fatigue syndrome was able to dramatically improve her well-being and double her livers' capacity to remove some toxins with a 32 week cleanse (http://www.metagenics.com/pdf/case_studies/MET909.pdf).